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A SKETCH OF HIS LIFE AND TEACHINGS



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SHRI EKANATH

(1528-1599)

Looking back to the five hundred and odd years of religious revival in Maharashtra from the times of Saint Dnyaneshwar down to the seventeenth century, what strikes us most is the uniformity and persistence with which the leaders of the awakening delivered their message. Though for a time it appeared that the seed which Dnyaneshwar sowed was cast on barren soil, still with the coming of Ekanath, it sprouted with an abundance that made ample reparations for its previous failure; the message of Dnyaneshwar, Namdev and Ekanath echoed and reached through city and hamlet till at last the burden of the song was taken up wherever Marathi was spoken or understood. Then came Tukaram; and he in his own unique way has immortalized the ideas of this religious movement and having succeeded in catching the attention of the modern reformer

and of the Christian Missionary has been "fortunate" enough to be translated into English. The vitality of a movement is measured by the greatness of its leaders, "its capacity to produce in each generation men fitted to carry on the work with greater vigour and more assured success," by the diffusion of its ideas through all classes of society and fourthly by the doctrinal improvement which it brings about. Judged by almost every one of these tests, it will be seen that this movement was neither spasmodic nor accidental but the ripe fruit of the efforts of great and heroic souls who knew what they were about and who adapted their message to the particular needs of their times. The lives of about fifty such saints have been chronicled and the very fact that about half of them were non-Brahmins and some of them even *Mahars* is an index to the general awakening. They all agreed in essentials and the message of one generation was delivered with unabated fidelity by another. It is true that they contributed nothing new to the philosophy of religion; neither did they set themselves to

destroy. Theirs was the unifying, harmonizing mission, the mission of peace and love, of meekness and forbearance, of rectitude and piety. They diffused the knowledge of religion and made it the property of the poorest and most ignorant. They raised the dignity of the house holder and showed how, even without shutting himself up in a cave, a man could attain salvation. They purified ritual, gave dignity to idol-worship and when Hinduism stood in danger, made it first the rallying-sound and then the war-cry of the people. All honour to these great men who in the days of storm and stress stood by Hinduism and by their unique efforts developed the idea of nationality which under the able guidance of Shivaji bore so glorious a fruit.

While reading the lives and studying the services of these saints we must always keep at the back of our mind the fact that the religious revival in Maharashtra synchronized with the occupation of the Maratha territory by the Mahomedans; and we cannot help admiring how, when the petty chieftains that dotted the

whole of western India were engaged in fighting their petty quarrels and the Pandits unworthily wrangling over the dregs of the Vedantic philosophy, these saints came forward and with a recognition that did them credit of the national danger, fought with the Muslim not with sword and gun but with the yet more potent weapons of Faith and Love. It is a relief to come to this period of Hindu history after the study of the "age of the Acharyas" when the best brains of the country were busily engaged in hair-splitting and text-torturing. The intellectual cannonade which shattered Buddhism and drove it out of India recoiled on itself and we have the lamentable spectacle of more than six centuries stretching, straining, twisting every word, line and page of a few ancient books! We admire the genius of those intellectual giants to whom in spite of their unfortunate method we owe a clear, definite and philosophical exposition of Hinduism. But we admire still more the sagacity of those Saints and Prophets who refused to confine their Spiritual Vision to the

contents of a few books. Not that they did not revere books: more, they have even commented upon some. But their attitude is so detached, so impartial, so uncontending as to disarm suspicion and scepticism and their occasional passionate outbursts proceeded not from the heat and warmth of advocacy but from that overflowing love which breathes through every word and runs through every thought. It was such men who were required to lead Maharashtra when the Moslem invader came—men, God-fearing, unassuming, persistent but patient, gifted but humble, men who in their Love of God had not forgotten man, who to improve their nation were heedless of their own salvation. To this class belonged Saint Dnyaneshwar who from a life-long bed of thorn, uttered only words of Peace and Love. To this class also belongs Saint Ekanath, the hero of our present sketch.

The ancient city of Pratishthan, later known by the name Paithan enjoyed during the middle ages a wide reputation for its piety and

scholarship. We have seen* how in the last quarter of the 13th century, the orthodox Brahmins of Alandi had asked Dnyaneshwar and his brothers to go to Paithan and see if the learned men of that place were willing to admit the "children of a Sanyasin" into the Brahmin caste. Even before that time and later, Paithan was regarded as the Benares of the Deccan and was one of the principal centres of orthodoxy. At the time we are writing about—the middle of the fifteenth century—there lived at Paithan a Brahmin named Bhanudas. He was a great devotee of the God Vithoba of Pandharpur†. It is said that the great King Krishna Rai (1430—1452) of Vijayanagar had come once to Pandharpur on pilgrimage. So pleased was he with the beauty of the image of Vithoba that he took it away to his capital to the mortification of all the devout *Bhaktas*. It was Bhanudas who boldly went after the King to Vijayanagar and there at dead of night entered the royal palace

* Sketch of Saint Dnyaneshwar.

† District Sholapur.

and embraced his favourite God! Vithoba presented him with His diamond necklace and promised that He would go to Pandharpur with his devotee. When, on the next day, the necklace was found in the possession of Bhanudas, the King at once sent him to the scaffold but the scaffold was miraculously turned into a beautiful tree, at which Krishna Rai begged pardon of Bhanudas and allowed him to take the image of Vithoba to Pandharpur. It was this Bhanudas who was the great-grandfather of Ekanath. Bhanudas had a son named Chakrapani whose son Surya Narayan was Ekanath's father. Ekanath was born about 1528. The exact date of his birth is not known. Soon after his birth he lost both his father and his mother and was brought up by Chakrapani. Those who have known what the love of a grandfather and a grandmother is "with its delightful weaknesses, with that complete collapse of all power of resistance to a child," in fact "the love of parents multiplied by two" need not be told that he passed an exceptionally happy childhood. He was never

a boy in habit and temperament. He spent days and months, not in childish plays and amusements but in going to the banks of the river Godavari, collecting curious-looking stones there and worshipping them as Siva. While the rest of his mates would play the horse with a stick, he, disdaining that game, would, with a staff on his shoulder, play at being a *Haridas* (lit. Servant of Hari), a religious preacher. He was never cross, and was always obedient and uniformly cheerful, so people were naturally drawn towards him and experienced a kind of pleasure in his company. He was a studious boy, quick at figures, and, seeing his sharp memory and understanding, his grandfather performed his *Upanayana* (ceremony of putting on the sacred thread) at the tender age of six. And then, all the craving for worship, for ceremonies, for devotion that was reflected in worshipping stones and playing at being a *Haridas* welled up into an earnest study of the Vedas, into close and attentive hearing of the lectures of religious preachers. The modest and charming way in which he asked difficult

points in Vedanta won the hearts of learned men but often they had to admit their own incapacity to explain his doubts ; then he would go to a temple of Siva and there remain absorbed in contemplation for hours. Nobody knew what plans he revolved in his mind in the solitude of that temple. Nobody—least of all his grandfather and grandmother—was prepared to find him give a slip one morning, and leave friends and relations in sorrow and surprise, never to be heard of for the next twelve years.

The spectacle of a boy of twelve, bright and happy, leaving friend and relations and going to practise religious austerities and seek spiritual salvation might well be termed a phenomenon. We have known wayward boys and youths, brought up in bad company, impatient of the restraint, to them dull, and of the monotony of a settled life, leave father, mother, without a tear of love or a qualm of conscience. Ekanath did not belong to this class. We have seen “life-wrecked” persons, battered through a stormy and chequered career, receiving hard knocks at every step, getting failure at every

turn, tired of life but afraid of death—leave the scene of their unlucky life and repair to forests, sheerly out of despair. We know Ekanath passed an exceptionally happy boyhood. A future, fair and bright, was smiling before him; a career of comfort and worldly greatness was within his reach; but he deliberately turned his back upon its charms and like the *Dhruva* of old repaired, nobody but himself knew where. We can well conceive how this boy, affectionate beyond measure, must have struggled and struggled with the thought of having to leave his dear old grandparents, how his heart must have ached and throbbed at the mere idea of their infinite sorrow, how and with what tender—almost pathetic devotion—he must have done services to them, possibly the last! Tradition tells us that he was strengthened in his resolution by the voice of God which he clearly and distinctly heard in his favourite temple asking him to go to Deogad* (Daulatabad) for spiritual realization.

Though an integral part of Maharashtra, Daulatabad now comes under the Dominions of H. E. H. the Nizam of Hyderabad.

Whether such a miracle as God delivering his message or advice in human accents is possible or whether such calls are, as Gibbon puts it, the workings of an overheated brain persistently busy at the same idea, may be doubted by modern rationalists. But the very fact that such a call was felt is itself a sure sign of the longing of the heart, and we cannot help thinking that a religion which gives such inspiration to persons like Ramdas, Ekanath or Ramakrishna Paramahansa in their boyhood, can certainly be proud of its past achievements and need not in the least be apprehensive of its future glory.

The voice which Ekanath heard in the temple advised him to go to Daulatabad and take his spiritual lessons at the feet of Janardanswami, chief officer on the fort. Had Ekanath consulted the opinions of well-informed persons he would not have taken a different course. Janardanswami was noted far and wide as being one of the greatest householder-saints of his time. Born in 1504 of an humble but pious Brahmin family he started his career at

a time when the Brahmins were in high favour with the Muslim rulers of the celebrated Bahamani Kingdom (1327-1526 A.D.). His talents were conspicuous, character reliable, and bravery admirable. He was at once an accountant, a soldier and a capable executive officer. But these qualities, bright as they were, were only the back ground of his wonderful spirituality. In the duplicity and intrigues of the court of Malik Ahmed, his unwavering probity was everywhere respected; and it is said that out of regard for his worship of *Shri Dattatreya* all the offices in the city and fort of Daulatabad were closed on Thursdays. Such was the man whom Ekanath was directed to join; and after days of travelling, he stood before the house of Jannardanswami, footsore, and thoroughly exhausted. The gates of the Swami were ever open to travellers. But though thus readily admitted, it was not without many misgivings that Ekanath approached the tall and princely Swami. There was, however, no rebuff but cordial welcome to this young stranger. At the

sight of Ekanath, the Swami remembered how that same form had appeared to him in his meditation that morning. With heart alternating between hope and fear, Ekanath told who he was and what took him thither. The Swami replied in suitable terms and promised to do everything he could for a boy of such promise and earnestness.

And now began a discipleship which to those who have been brought up in modern ideas and under modern conditions might appear meaningless and even stupid but without which no true spirituality can grow. The complete effacement of all ego and individuality is the *sine qua non* of purity of heart, and in the development of religious faculties it is not the head but the heart that is principally concerned. This must not be understood to mean that religion requires blind faith and surrender, total or partial, of reason. Spirituality never expects any intellectual slavery. What is required is patience, confidence and love. These open the gates of the heart and make it ready for the final

realisation. It is not without sufficient reason that Narendranath Datta (afterwards the Swami Vivekanand) sat at the feet of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, fighting intellectually no doubt, but loving his Guru with the heart of a child. Ekanath yielded the same tribute of love. He had never to wade through that scepticism and intellectual doubting which for many years tormented Vivekananda. His mind was, happily for him, already attuned to faith and in his spiritual progress, intellect occupied a subordinate, but by no means contemptible, place. To make his heart sublime, to purify his mind and develop spiritual faculties he followed the time-honoured course viz., personal attendance on, and service of, his Guru. From early morning till late at night he waited upon Janardanswami and though the Swami had scores of servants, yet Ekanath tried to dispense with the attendance of as many as was possible, so that he might be able to do each and every service however humble, however contemptible for his Guru. He himself has given us a description of how

the true disciple serves his Guru and we have not the slightest doubt that he himself had acted up to his own ideal :—

“ With his heart full of devotion he (the true disciple) chants, day in and day out, the name of his Guru. When the Guru is absent he will always be, like the unfledged bird waiting for its mother, thinking of him. In the company of his Guru he forgets everything else, forgets that he has a body of his own which requires occasionally at least, food and drink, rest and sleep ; more, he forgets his family, father and mother, wife and child. He will plunge himself in the river of nectar of his Guru's worship. He will ever drink the milk of service from the udders of his desire-yielding cow—Guru. He envies the dust his Guru treads, and the very air which he breathes, for he knows that his Guru is his ideal, greater by far than even father or mother, greater than everything else in this world.”*

* All the renderings from Ekanath's writings are specially made for this sketch.

There is certainly an element of danger in this path, both for the Guru as well as for the disciple. Such service greater than that which the wife offers to her husband or the child to his or her parent, so closely akin in outward form at least to the extreme forms of slavery, is a fruitful cause of degeneration when it is rendered to a person whose spiritual nature has been developed but imperfectly. There is the danger of the Guru becoming an impostor, and the disciple nothing better than a willing slave. But under favourable circumstances this form of worship is more helpful to the disciple than the worship of idols and images. Whatever that might be, Ekanath derived great benefit by living with Janardanswami. Occasionally, the Swami would send Ekanath to a neighbouring hill in order to practise solitary and austere *tapasya*. He would now and again put Ekanath to the test and see how far his disciple had advanced. Sometimes again, it was after the lamps were put out and the night far advanced that he would discourse with Ekanath on the subject of the

realisation of God. Again and again would Ekanath ask him "Revered Sir, how shall I realise God?" and the answer to the question was to Ekanath's mind indefinitely postponed. On one occasion Ekanath sat up far into the night, for hours occupied in finding out a mistake of one pie in the official accounts which he kept for his Guru. Again and again he turned his eyes over the never-ending pages of the account-books and still no trace of the slip. "Shall I, this once fail in my duty and incur the Swami's displeasure?" he thought. But there was no time for such thoughts. So with heart heavy and eyes wet he trimmed his lamp and plunged himself into the ocean of figures. At last the mistake was found and in ecstasy Ekanath clapped his hands and laughed loudly. When he turned back it was to find his Guru standing at his back, the picture of kindness and dignity. Ekanath in silence fell at his feet. "Now my son," the Swami said, "you know the way to realisation. Can you not turn the same concentration Godward and

discover this whole mistake of Life?" "To be sure I will," said Ekanath and from that day redoubled his exertions. He practised the severest forms of penance in a solitary corner of the fortress and we are told that when he was lost in meditation, a serpent used regularly to go to Ekanath's cave and there coil up its body round his limbs. At first it wanted to bite him but such is the power of spirituality that as soon as the serpent touched Ekanath's body, all its wicked impulse disappeared and if it frequented its visits, it was only to do some service to Ekanath by coiling up its tail round Ekanath's neck and holding its hood over his head as if to protect him from the sun. Ekanath himself was for many days quite ignorant of his new friend and servant, for the latter disappeared from the place before Ekanath came to the plane of consciousness. On one day, however, as chance would have it, a shepherd saw it and gave a cry which at once brought Ekanath to consciousness. Those who know what a kind heart Ekanath had and how he carried the principles of *Ahimsa* to

the extreme throughout his long life, need not be told that the life of the snake was spared. We have this story on the authority of Ekanath himself. Another story has been handed down to us which though not as well authenticated is equally remarkable. On one Thursday Janardanswami, as was his wont, was engaged in the worship of his favourite God, Shri Dattatreya. Suddenly the alarm was sounded and word was brought that a strong and numerous enemy force was advancing on the fort and that there was not a single moment to lose. In the thick fog of historical uncertainty which hangs over the period, we have no means of understanding who the enemy was and what the nature was of the struggle which the garrison of Deogad was called upon to face. We are concerned not so much with the nature of defence as with Ekanath's part therein. When the news of the approach of the enemy troops was brought by the courier, Janardanswami was deep in meditation. Ekanath, who was standing by the gate of the temple-room received the news and was one short minute

exceedingly perplexed. Should he rouse his Guru from meditation and thus disturb his worship? If not, what was to be done in the matter? Ekanath made up his mind to personate the Swami. Being rather of the same height and stature as his Guru, he was quite successful especially when clad in the armour of the Swami. He led the attack, gave all orders and within a very short time routed the forces of the enemy; and when amidst shouts and cheers the victorious pseudo-Janardan returned, he found the Swami just roused from his trance, reading the letter Ekanath had left. In a twinkling everything was explained and the Swami could find no words to express his admiration for the zeal and devotion of his disciple. It must have been such episodes as these revealing the sterling worth of Ekanath that must at last have induced the Swami to rend the last film of ignorance from the mind of his disciple. So on a bright Thursday morning he asked Ekanath to accompany him to a favourite and solitary place of contemplation just a couple of miles away from his

residence. Ekanath instinctively knew that the moment had come and so with heart beating with wild hope and joy he followed the Swami to the beautiful grove whose sight put him in mind of those singularly beautiful verses in Dnyaneshwari:—

“It must be a cool place, sheltered by a cluster of trees growing round a beautiful temple of *Siva*. Bits of sunshine peeping through the branches must, however, illumine it and the air, cool, fragrant and refreshing render it pleasant. Small streams of sparkling water, gaily dancing in their course, silently lapping, will do much to add to its charms. No sound there except the sweet prattle of the parrot and the humming of the bee. A solitary swan or a couple of *chakrwaka* birds will not be entirely unwelcome; and if in addition the cuckoo cooes or the peacock dances, well, we shall not drive them away. In short the place must be such as to amuse the worldly, soothe the depressed, stimulate the *Sadhaka* and induce even a king if he visits it to lay aside his crown and live there in peace and meditation.”

He had till now the whole of this description by heart but he had never yet an experience of that tranquillity of mind which prepared him for the coming spiritual treat. "Well, my boy, standⁿ here for sometime. Know that this is the crowning day of your life; and don't you be afraid of whatever form you might see Lord Dattatreya coming in." No sooner had his back turned than Ekanath saw a Mahomedan friar, tall and dark, his form clothed in a fresh hide reeking of stench; he was followed by an ugly and terrible bitch with eyes streaming with blood like those of the fabled Furies. Ekanath gave a start but instantly remembering the caution of his Guru became his former self again. The Swami and his visitor began to converse on diverse subjects till at last the Swami called Ekanath and presenting him to the "*Malanga*"* ordered him to milch the bitch. Ekanath did as was direct-

* The word in the chronicles is "*Malanga*" which according to the dictionary means "a Mahomedan friar professing extreme poverty and leading an austere life partly in monasteries and partly itinerent." But more probably it means a 'Dhor' or a man belonging to that low caste which deals in the hide of cattle, etc.

ed and before the "*Malanga*" disappeared Ekanath had the singular good fortune of seeing him transformed into that familiar form of Dattatreya which he had pictured to his mind so often. And who should the bitch be, but that celebrated *Kama-dhenu*, the desire-fulfilling cow? Lord Dattatreya blessed Ekanath, prophesied his future greatness and foretold that he would write a commentary on the 11th Chapter of the *Bhagvat Puran*.

From this time onward Ekanath could, at will, see the saintly form of the Son of Atri. We have it on the authority of Ekanath himself that the Lord Dattatreya lent him aid and encouragement while writing his works and that the Lord had with His own protecting hand shielded him from danger. Was the vision purely subjective? Was it that the fancy of Ekanath incessantly at work dreamt forms and sights, rendered familiar by his intimate knowledge of the Puranas or was it some higher, deeper, mysterious spiritual experience which defies the laws of reason and staggers imagination? Those who know how the late

Swami Vivekananda felt, wherever he went, the accompanying and protecting hand of Kali ever claspt to his own, will pause before they venture on a dogmatic assertion. Let us who stand on the physical and intellectual plain only, chronicle without censure or criticism the miraculous happenings in the lives of great saints and prophets. At any rate it is not strange for one like Ekanath who had renounced home and heart at the tender age of twelve and passed the fruitful years of his youth in constant meditation and prayer, to have gone through stages of spiritual development, which to us, poor mortals are inexplicable. Let us own that our much-boasted modern Science has not yet even accurately registered the phenomena which transcend ordinary rules of matter. It is only on such a candid and humble confession of ignorance that the future progress of science depends.

Now that Ekanath had attained the acme of his ambition, it was time for him to leave the residence of his Guru and go back either to his own city or repair to any region which his

fancy chose. But he showed no desire of doing anything of the kind. With the same joyful, peaceful, unruffled devotion he served his Guru and lived with him. He would gladly have remained with the Swami till the end of life. But Janardanswami knew that Ekanath had a mission in life and, to further prepare him for it, he asked him to go on a round of pilgrimage, visiting sacred cities, rivers and shrines. At this Ekanath was all tears. Which shrine or river, said he, was more sacred than those revered feet which he had been worshipping? No, he would not leave his Guru under any circumstances. It was only when the Swami promised to accompany Ekanath for some time that the latter consented. They left Daulatabad and went to *Panchabati* near Nasik, far-famed in the Ramayan as having been sanctified by the residence of Rama. In the sixteenth century, Nasik was an important stronghold of orthodoxy, a centre of learning and culture, and one of those half a dozen cities in Maharashtra which maintained its reputation for piety and scholarship. From *Panchabati*,

they went to *Tryambakeshwar* (20 miles from Nasik), the place whence the river Godavari starts its course and one of the twelve places in the Deccan having a temple of Siva which is said to be the work of no mortal. To Ekanath and his Guru, it was rendered even holier by the fact that the great *Nivriddideva*, the elder brother of Dnyaneshwar had attained spiritual wisdom there. They lived there for sometime and then the Swami intimated his wish to return to Deogad. "Go thou, my son," said he, "and in spirit I shall accompany you wherever you are. On your way you will meet persons of all sorts, persons high and low, rich and poor, saintly and wicked. Remember you are not to display your spiritual power to anybody. My blessings with you always!"

It is needless to follow Ekanath visiting shrine after shrine in Northern India and saturating his mind with that religious fervour which coupled with his own earnestness of purpose, made him a singularly proper man to lead Maharashtra in the religious revival which had been already started. His pilgrimage in Upper India

was a great eye-opener to him inasmuch as it brought to his mind vividly the destructive work wrought by the Moslem invaders wherever they went. It widened his intellectual vision, deepened his sympathies, strengthened his faith and ingrained in him the ambition of directing in proper channel the religious enthusiasm of his country. So when after many months he returned to *Paithan* it must have been with the fixed purpose of taking up the work for which he was born. To add to this the message which Janardhanswami, his old Gura, sent to him about this time expressly required him to become a householder. The itinerent tendency was still strong in him and when he went to *Paithan* it was not to his own house that he walked straight but put up in the temple of Siva, where the voice of God had, years before, enjoined him to go to Deogad. As was his wont, he went round the village in the evening a-begging. It was impossible for even his dearest friends of childhood to recognize him, so completely was he transformed in age, dress, features and

everything. But his old grandfather who for the last twelve years had been fondly expecting Ekanath's return and who tried to discover the features of Ekanath in every stray traveller and *bairagi* instantly recognised him. He threw his arms round the neck of Ekanath and wept long and bitterly. It is hard to say how much of grief and how much of joy there was in his feelings. "Now, my son," he said, "you must never forsake me." "But, father, shall I not complete my pilgrimage and go to South-India shrines?" "No, you may not," persisted the old man. "The autumn of old age has well nigh made my leaf of life ready to drop down. Stay, stay with me, if only till I die. Besides, here is something for you." With these words he placed a carefully-kept note before Ekanath who instantly recognising the writing to be Janardhanswami's first held it over his head and then read it through. Ekanath made up his mind. He would, to obey his Guru, be a householder and side by side continue his religious and literary work. In pursuance of this plan he got himself

married and settled in his old house at Paithan.

When Ekanath returned to Paithan, he was about twenty-five years of age. From that time till 1599, the year of his death, he lived mostly at Paithan, dividing his time between spiritual meditation and prayer on the one hand and religious lectures, discourses and compositions on the other. In the life of saint Dayaneshwar we have seen how wide-spread the literary instinct of the men and women of the religious revival in Maharashtra was. They not only sought spiritual knowledge and inspiration, but no sooner did they have it than at once they rushed into literary composition in order to impart it to others. When we see how powerful this impulse for communication was, we need not wonder that Ekanath wrote some books. On the contrary we are surprised to find that, excepting his commentary on what is called the *chattus-sloki Bhagvat* (four verses in the Bhagavat Puran summarizing the conclusions of the Vedanta and of the philosophy of life) he wrote nothing for more

than twelve years since his return to Paithan. The simplicity and unassuming modesty of his nature might perhaps be responsible for this. Whatever that be, we might well suppose that he was not idle. He has told us how

“Blessed is this *Kali* age, in spite of its wickedness because we can attain salvation simply by singing the glory of Hari. All castes, all creeds, assemble together and praise the Lord according to their knowledge and faith. Your sex or caste does not count. It matters not whether you are a Sudra or a woman. Have Bhakti, sing the glory of Hari and you can attain Heaven. Even the Vedas are miserly because they are open to the first three castes only. But this *Kirtan* is the privilege of the lowest and meanest person. It will deepen your faith and strengthen your spirit. Even the happiness of *Mukti* sinks into insignificance before the ecstasy of *kirtan*. It entails neither the hardships of yoga nor the rigorous tedium of sacrifices. It is the highest worship.” This *kirtan*, public and

private, was his only occupation ; his voice was musical and his presence commanding, and whenever he gave religious lectures with the accompaniment of music, thousands of people eagerly gathered in his courtyard, filling every nook and corner, sometimes compelled to find uncomfortable seats on walls and on the branches of neighbouring trees. His earnestness of purpose, his piety, his passionate enthusiasm, his learning and above all, the purity of his life and true spiritual insight and experience made him an ideal preacher. The theme differed with the occasion. Now it was the glory of Shri Rama and Krishna, the most favourite Avatars of Hindu Mythology ; sometimes it was the life of a Great Bhakta that was placed before the audience, of Dnyaneshwar, the son of a *sanyasin* and himself a born one or of Damaji who, unable to see the terrible sufferings of people in famine, opened the corn stores of the Government, allowed people to plunder them and was saved from the wrath of the Mahomedan King of Bidar by the intervention of God Vithoba himself. W.

ever the theme, the burden of the song was the same viz., the insistence on the observance of the *Bhagvat* faith. It was the *Bhagvat Dharma* which, before him, Dnyaneshwar, Namdev and others had preached to the people and it was the *Bhagavat Dharma* which Ekanath also preached to his contemporaries.

The *Dharma* preached by *Bhagavat* or Lord Krishna to Uddhava in the 11th chapter of the *Bhagavat Puran* is popularly known as the *Bhagavat Dhārma*, though as Mr. Tilak has proved in his *Gita-Rahasya* that name can be applied to the message of the Gita itself. But though both Dnyaneshwar and Ekanath were devotees of Lord Krishna, and though they have written commentaries on the message of Krishna in the Gita and in the *Bhagvat Purana* respectively, still even they could not go against the current and displace God Vithoba by God Krishna. The *Bhagvat Dharma* of old, as modified in the religious revival we are speaking about, was inseparably associated with the worship of Vithoba of Pandharpur. It is remarkable how without

any prestige of antiquity, mythology or Puranic description, this God came to be so widely worshipped in Maharashtra as to induce Dnyaneshwar and Ekanath to accept the traditional identity between Him and Lord Krishna. They knew that without the backing of some learned and philosophical literary works this worship of Vithoba was likely to be shortlived and confined only to a very small class of people. They therefore availed themselves of the tide of the national sentiment which they tried to strengthen by allying it with the ancient philosophy as found in the *Gita* and the *Bhagvat Purana* and this was more necessary because the worshippers of Vithoba were ignorant and heedless of Sanskrit which contains all the treasures of Hindu philosophy. It was this literary backing of Dnyaneshwar and Ekanath coupled with other causes that we have no time to recount here that has still kept the "cult" living while other sterner, and in their days, stronger cults have languished.

But though the Gita and the Bhagvat were the mainsprings of inspiration, still the men of this revival, leaders and followers alike did not rely on these books with the same fanaticism which has guided the various sects of Acharyas with regard to the *Prasthanā-trayee* (the *Brahmasutras*, the *Upanishads* and the *Gita*). Almost none of those men had received that intellectual training which delights in hair-splittings of words and subtleties of thoughts. They therefore approached Sanskrit works on philosophy and metaphysics with the attitude of the man of the world, of one who would fain learn but who at the same time has no mind to wade through the niceties of thought and argument. They had the highest reverence for the Vedas and the various *Shastras* and since the Vedas, the *Shastras*, the *Smritis* and even the *Puranas* were very old and belonged to a time which could not be measured, they regarded them with equal reverence. But the very plurality of books of authority was prejudicial to that authority. Therefore, instead of conforming their ideas and visions

to any book or set of books, they took what was helpful to them without a word of censure or criticism of what they rejected.

Another feature of this school was the holding up of *Bhakti* over all other forms of *Sadhanas* :

“ One need not renounce his belongings and go to a forest. One need not prepare the mind by hard self-control for difficult *Samadhi*. If we only worship Hari and chant His name, salvation will stand begging at our doors. Look at the Gopis. Had they any learning? Had they practised any of the *Sadhanas*? No. Their one qualification was the steadfast *Bhakti* of the Lord through thick and thin; and that was enough. Why curb the senses? Why run away from objects of the senses? Whatever thou hast, dedicate to God and chant His name. Meditation requires high intellect. How can the man in the street practise it? The rituals and ceremonials require accuracy in performance. Their rigid discipline is very difficult. But a *Bhakta* requires no such discipline. A *Bhakta's*

progress towards God is like that of a young prince to his father, the king. While other visitors wait in the ante-chamber, the prince goes boldly to his father and talks with him. So the yogins wait and wait but the *Bhakta* directly and with ease attains salvation. Leave then, therefore, the noble flights of philosophy to men of genius and the complexities of ceremonies to those who might like them, and take this straight and easy path of *Bhakti*."

So, leaving the "drill" of *Karma-kanda* to dotards and fanatics and the flights of metaphysics to philosophers, these men went straight to the tree of *Bhakti* and tasted of its nectar-like fruit to their hearts' content; and here also we might find the traces of that peculiar method which for want of a better name we shall call "Indian." It rejects nothing. Whatever forms, rituals, ceremonies they found in their times, these men (Dnyaneshwar, Ekanath and other leaders of the revival) kept in tact. They pulled down nothing. They have not one word of condem-

nation for even that part of our ritual which is meaningless. They however glorified *Bhakti* to such an extent that from its peaks everything else appeared small and contemptible. This method is eminently constructive and though it has its disadvantages, yet it is infinitely better and more conducive to permanent results than the fanfaronade of the impatient reformer.

These and other causes made the movement an essentially democratic one. It is true that bigots, the professional scholars and philosophers and metaphysicians stood aloof from it. The latter found nothing to admire in a movement impatient of learning and solely occupied with the glorification of the name of Hari. They therefore refused to join it or joined it only when a compelling personality like that of Dnyaneshwar or Ramdas obliged them to leave their books and study wisdom acquired from more natural and direct sources. The bigots will be bigots always. Ekanath has told us what they thought of him :—

“Look at this Ekanath, the disciple of

Janardanswami. He cares neither for marks, signs, figures and secret symbols, nor for our old ceremonies and practices. He chants the name of Hari and by some mysterious force is deceiving the people. Should he not at least give some *mantra* to those who seek wisdom from him—*mantra* given in secrecy and kept with mystery ?”

But this mystery about religion was exactly what Ekanath and others tried to remove. It is true that for the motive of spiritual practices they have gone back to that pessimism which makes the highest enunciation appear in a somewhat unfavourable light when compared with the joyful self-reliance of modern thought. It is astonishing how the great Dnyaneshwar himself, ever-brimful of infinite divine joy and whose life was one long wakeful *samadhi* of spiritual ecstasy, has condemned all life as the home of eternal woe and misery. Says he :—

“ Look at this market of human life where sorrow is being bought and sold. Do you expect to get any happiness from this life ? You might as well try to blow up the ash that

covers the fire which is already extinguished. Will you get sleep on a bed of live fire? Where birth itself is a preliminary stage of death, where misery puts on a cover of attractive joy and where the step of death is heard even in the womb of a would-be mother—do you say you can gather real happiness in a world like this?" It might be, that the ever-increasing political and national misfortunes of Maharashtra might have well chimed in with the ring of pessimism that somewhat takes away the charm of this religious revival. All the same we are conscious of an entire awakening, reaching the lowest castes, the nooks and corners of society and this awakening itself contributed in no small measure to the raising of the status of the non-Brahmin castes. With what pride do we now recall those memorable words of *Chokamela*, the Mahar saint: "Never ask a man's caste when he has in his heart faith in God and love of men. God wants in his children love and devotion and. He does not care for his caste." Possibly for a time the spirituality of men like him was not recog-

nised but soon after he came to be respected by the proudest Brahmin. Ekanath has more than once charged the Vedas with being miserly inasmuch as they were shut up from the Sudras and Pariahs. "Greater than anything, greater even than the holy Vedas is the name of Hari which is not forbidden to any, even to those so-called low class people." It is worth noting that Ekanath does not himself call them low class people but prefixes the word "so-called" to mark his view of the equality of all castes and creeds.

It is not strange that a man who saw God in every form, human or animal, and who had been specially trained in this spiritual quality by his Guru should himself have occasionally set aside the restrictions of caste. It is said that on one day at high noon Ekanath was going to bathe in the waters of the Godavari when he saw a Mahar child stumbling and falling in the dust. Ekanath at once ran to the spot, picked up that child and himself took it to the house of its mother. On another occasion he nursed a Mahar

prisoner recently let off from jail and on the verge of physical wreck. Another story tells us how one day when the food for *shraddha* was being cooked in his kitchen, some Mahars passing by the house smelt it and whispered among themselves "How happy would it be if we ever get such nice food to eat." Ekanath who overheard the remark at once called them and not minding the inevitable wrath of those Brahmins who were invited to perform the *shraddha*, served the Mahars with the dainty food. These and like other stories conclusively prove how deeply ingrained in his mind was that principle of equality which is the *sine qua non* of true spirituality. Says he:—

"The true *Bhakta* regards each object in universe as the image of God. It is true that the Vedas say 'Never see the face' of a man who has strayed away from his proper *karman*.' But this commandment is only for the first few stages. We require a lamp only when it is dark. But when the sun of divine knowledge rises there is no necessity for

seeking aid from this petty lamp of the *Vedas*. A man who regards the most enlightened Brahman as being filled with the same God who dwells in the body of the lowliest of the lowly, is a true *Bhakta*. The same element of lustre only in different proportions is found in the sun and the firefly. From the ant to the creator, everything, living or dead, is the image of God. Look at the tree which gives with the same impartiality its shade, fruit and flowers to the man who has watered it as well as to him who wishes to fell it down. Such should be a *Bhakta* in his dealings with others. Equality is the highest spiritual quality."

Side by side with this quality we find another, which must have stood him in good stead throughout all the trials and vexations of his life and that was his serene peace of mind undisturbed by any calamity, or persecutions. Under the hardest knocks of ill-fortune he preserved a countenance singularly unruffled and a temper perfectly under control. It is interesting to see how misfortune affected Tukaram, Ekanath and Dnyaneshwar.

severally. Suffering drew tears from the eyes of Tukaram. In the depth of sorrow he sought and obtained shelter at the feet of Vithoba. The temper of Dnyaneshwar was the very reverse of that of Tukaram. He was a man who mocked at sorrow and laughed at persecution. He was all ecstasy. Through pain, persecution and misery, he kept the same joyous mood which sweetened more and more with every blow. Ekanath resembled neither Dnyaneshwar nor Tukaram in this respect. He hit the golden mean, was neither all ecstasy nor all sorrow but, like the flame sheltered from wind, kept the fire of faith and hope ever steady, neither bursting into dazzling light nor drooping down almost to darkness. It is such a man who can control his temper amidst the numerous storms of life and it is this quality which, joined with its accompanying patience and sweet reasonableness facilitates the task of the reformer by disarming prejudice and opposition. There are many anecdotes of Ekanath illustrative of all these qualities. On one occasion a certain Mahomedan, whom

Ekanath had never offended and who perhaps was a tool in the hands of some "respectable" persons spat at Ekanath who was on his way home from the river Godavari. It was a gratuitous insult but without a word of reproof Ekanath retraced his steps to the river and bathed again. But the man would not allow Ekanath to go without a repetition of his wicked act. Ekanath bathed again only to find the spittle of the ruffian on his body a third time. This happened for 108 times till at last in shame and reverence the Mahomedan apologised and fell prostrate before Ekanath. There is another story which tells us that, like the famous Pavari Baba, he would not allow the thieves who had stolen into his house and were running away at the sight of Ekanath to go away without taking some articles at least ! And when the contrite thieves begged pardon, he asked them to dine with him and then return to their places. And the blessings which he poured on a public woman who one day sought his spiritual advice remind us of similar incidents in the life of Ramakrishna

Paramahansa and of Jesus Christ. It was this unconventionality of his conduct that created the opposition of the social and religious bigots of his times and that has induced the English-educated reformers of India to claim Ekanath as a social reformer. It is hardly possible however to find in his writings anything bespeaking agreement with the tenets of our present-day reform movement.

It is not surprising that the message of a man, who acted up to every principle that he preached, should have found place into the hearts of the ever-increasing crowds of people who daily gathered to hear his sermons. But the fame of the most eloquent speaker, though it might go down to future generations, will never produce abiding results unless it is supported by an authoritative exposition of his ideas. That is why so many illustrious persons have not disdained to write books. The only surprise about Ekanath is not that he wrote books but that he did not make any serious effort before he was well over 40; and this is the more remarkable because

about the time of his return home from Daulatabad he had, in response to a sudden inspiration written a commentary on the four celebrated verses in Bhagvat, the Chattus-Shlōki Bhagvat, in the presence of his Guru. On his return to Paithan his time was divided between reading, contemplation and preaching; and those who were specially attracted towards Ekanath and who daily drank of spiritual wisdom at his feet requested him one day to write something which would be permanent. It was at their request that he took the text of the 11th chapter of the *Bhagvat Puran* for exposition and commentary. He completed the first five chapters and then went, (at the request of a disciple it is said) to Benares to convince some opponents of his of the worth of the book. Those who know how modest and unassuming Ekanath was, will scarcely credit this story. That Ekanath would, for the first and last time in his life, pay the disputant back in his own coin was unthinkable. We are half-inclined to suppose that he went there to submit his work to the superior taste and

judgment of the learned pandits living there. We know how Moropant, the famous Maratha poet and others took all their literary works to Benares and got the seal of the approval of renowned pandits. They were not satisfied with the popular homage but wished that their compositions should be applauded by scholars of eminence also. They had to begin by combating the prejudice of Sanskrit Pandits against Marathi. We have already seen, in another sketch, how Dnyaneshwar though not at pains to remove the scholastic prejudice, has yet to point out to the literary excellence of his own composition as a silencer to all the howlings of the bigots. Ekanath's attitude is equally vigorous and self-confident:—

“We admit that the Sanskrit writers were great. But why should we suppose that Marathi writers fall below the mark? Have they not tried, in their own way, to deliver the same message? Is a gold lotus, more precious only because it is old? One cow gives milk, but does another yield water? If the same ideas are imparted through a different

medium what do you lose ? You say Sanskrit is the language of the gods ? But is not Marathi also the same ? Or is it the language of thieves and robbers ? The result is that whether Sanskrit imparts religious knowledge to people or Marathi, it does not matter so long as the ideas are the same."

This is not an apologia but a proud assertion of the dignity of the Marathi language and its claim to be regarded with no less reverence than Sanskrit. The bigots, however, were not to be suddenly won over by such a categorical declaration with regard to the position of the Marathi. Ekanath's fame had already preceded him and they tried to frighten him into submission by bodily attacking him with a company of three hundred followers armed with clubs and sticks ! But something in Ekanath held them back and they could not find in themselves to beat him. It is not to be supposed, however, that they were won over. The only change in their attitude was one of sullen contempt instead of boisterous display of

opposition. There were certain scholars, who, though they could not refuse Ekanath's request for a patient hearing, were yet too proud to see his face and we have the amusing spectacle of Ekanath reading out his chapters to the assembly of Pandits some of whom had concealed themselves behind *purdas* ! They did not want to see the damned face of Ekanath who in their opinion was something worse than a heretic. But the intrinsic worth of Ekanath's composition together with that "soft answer that turneth away wrath," which he knew how to give, gradually won for him the favour of the Pandits, not however, before one of them had put Ekanath's commentary to the divine test by throwing it into the Ganges and accepted its worth only on finding Mother Ganges herself supporting the book and not allowing it to go down !

All opposition was now disarmed ; those who came to scoff remained to praise. The Pandits of Benares gave royal honour to his book by placing it on an elephant and carrying it in procession through-

out that sacred city. We may say that it was the triumph not of Ekanath but of the Marathi language which hitherto was regarded as the language of the low. At the earnest request of many of the pandits, Ekanath remained at Benares for more than two years, finished his commentary on the *Bhagvat Puran*, and started writing and finished a small but very beautiful poem called the "Swayamvar of Rukhmini." The latter is a composition running into about 1,700 verses but his commentary on the *Bhagvat* is a big work containing 20,000 verses.

Ekanath's life at Benares was an eye-opener to the Pandits in more ways than one. For the first time in their lives perhaps, they were awakened to the sense of the inferiority of mere book-learning when pitted against *Bhakti*; and when brought face to face with Ekanath they must have hung their heads at the consciousness of their own petty and jealous minds and admired that serene tranquillity which as Cowper says is the noblest fruit of a man's

faith in God. What a contrast between their minds bubbling with ideas of self, of honour, of fame, of opponents vanquished and followers made, and the mind of Ekanath which no gross thought could tarnish and which like the bright rays of the sun might touch the earth but would never catch any filth therefrom !

Having established his prestige at Benares Ekanath returned to his own province and with his outlook widened again took in hand the task of religious revival which he was interrupted in, by his visit to Benares. Till now he had confined himself to his own circle at Paithan and though in India the fame of spirituality does bring to a man hundreds of men, eager for words of religious wisdom, from all parts of the country, still even the preacher has occasionally to admit the usefulness of going to preach at various centres of faith and culture ; and now it was that Ekanath conceived the idea of bringing under his influence the worshippers of God Vithoba. He went to Pandharpur where his worth was at once recognised and thus

brought him many followers. At Pandharpur and other places he had marked the respect that was shown to the memory of Dnyaneshwar. But unhappily very few people had the text of Dnyaneshwar's commentary with them, and those few who had got the texts were unable to understand the meaning clearly ; for since the death of Dnyaneshwar about the end of the thirteenth century, the Marathi language had undergone such transformation that few were, in Ekanath's time, acquainted with their contents. Ekanath, therefore, conceived the idea of publishing the original text but he quickly found that it was better to preserve the original beauty of the composition which though occasionally rude and jarring owing to the nature of the language yet was far more eloquent than any subsequent alterations could make it. In this work, he was encouraged by Saint Dnyaneshwar himself who, one night, appeared in dream before him and called him to Alandi. Obedient to the call Ekanath immediately repaired to Alandi and there had the unique honour of a three days'

talk with saint Dnyaneshwar in the solitude of his underground Samadhi ! Ekanath got copied the original or at any rate a very old and considerably authentic text of Dnyaneshwari and distributed those copies to the remotest corners of Maharashtra and must have sent scores of preachers to explain the meaning of the old and archaic language to the ordinary people. The fact that not once the fear of his own book being superseded by the nobler work of Dnyaneshwar struck his mind, shows the true magnanimity of Ekanath.

Ekanath led a singularly happy life. The shadow of misfortune, of financial difficulties, of domestic discord which hung like a pall over the earlier years of Tukaram's life never disturbed his equanimity. The social ostracism that to the end of his days dogged the footsteps of Dnyaneshwar never came to the lot of Ekanath in its utmost rigour. It is true that even he had to pay the price of his occasionally unconventional conduct but so great was his popularity and so unstinted his charity that the howls of censure and criticism were

quickly silenced. His serene tranquillity helped him to ride over the storms of his life. In the company of a devoted wife and of a devoted friend named Uddhav, in the enjoyment of a competent fortune, of health, of all the necessities of a happy life one might well envy the career of a man whose thoughts were always directed to the contemplation of God, whose tongue uttered only words of love, of faith and of wisdom, whose hands were ever busy ministering to the needs of men. The gates of his house were ever open to the high and low alike. If he ran into debt it was solely because of his innumerable guests; and how often was the hand of God required to pay the importunate money-lenders on Ekanath's account. We have it on the authority of his contemporaries that the God Hari was so much pleased with the devoted service of Ekanath, that out of gratitude He left his home in Heaven and served Ekanath for full twelve years. Whatever that may be, even those who will not believe in the possibility of such miracles, shall have to admit that the man

who ever since his childhood gave the best in him to religion, must have in a spiritual sense walked with God.

The smoothness of Ekanath's domestic life was later on disturbed by the conduct and attitude of his son Hari who was in many respects quite the opposite of his father. With the impulsive waywardness of youth he would often find fault with his father for having destroyed the prestige and dignity of the Vedanta by compositions in Marathi. He also disliked the unconventional ways of his father, and, being a proud and unbending champion of orthodoxy, resented his father's behaviour on more occasions than one. At last the son was provoked beyond endurance and left his home in disgust. But Ekanath who had a mind to bring his son round followed him to Benares and after repeated importunities brought him back to Paithan. He had however to stipulate that the work of expounding the Vedanta would be entrusted to his son. But when the son found that his lectures, however learned drew only scores of people while the audience

of Ekanath were 'to be counted by the thousand, he was quickly disillusioned.

And now came the time when Ekanath had to leave his mortal body. His message was delivered and his life-work done; and though he was amusing himself with writing the story of Rama, he felt that the call from above had come. He told his friends and followers accordingly. "But, Sir," said they, "have you not your Ramayan to complete yet? We remember how you postponed by eleven days the time of the death of Krishnadas the poet? Will you mind performing the same feat again?" Ekanath replied that he had no such intention; he had undertaken the work at the order of Sree Rama Himself. Now if He the God willed that it should remain incomplete, surely he (Ekanath) had no business to bring it to an end. Again and again his friends pressed him. At last Ekanath said "why do you trouble me like that? If it is God's will that the work should be finished, then even this boy will do the work." The people were surprised to see Ekanath pointing to a boy of

fifteen, not very remarkable for his intelligence. They did not know what to say. Ekanath noted their incredulous looks, called up the boy and bade him go on ; and at once the boy delivered the text of one chapter without pause or hesitation. We have neither time, nor space nor the necessary imagination to describe the tenderness, the love and the sorrow in which on the 6th day of the dark half of Falguna, 1521 Shalivahan (1599 A.D.) the populace of Paithan followed Ekānath to the river Godavari. The sky rang with the loud and ecstatic *Bhajan*. After it was over, Ekanath took off his clothes and entered the stream. Some say he never returned ; others hold that after an invigorating bath, he came out of the water and with his eyes shut and mind concentrated, entered with the wings of meditation into eternal Samadhi.

The appearance of Ekanath at a time when, after the disruption of the Bhamani Kingdom in 1526 and its consequent division into five effete monarchies, Maharashtra was fast recovering its national consciousness, is an event of

the deepest significance. It shows how the nation, ever alert, ever mindful even under the hardest blows of misfortune, of its mission, was slowly but steadily preparing for the fulfilment thereof. It shows how the inspiration which later on guided Shivaji, moved other men also, working in the social and religious field and that though quite independent of each other the political and socio-religious movements were running along parallel and homogeneous directions. It is true that under the able leadership of Ramdas, the religious revival did assume a distinctly political form, lending aid to and receiving inspiration from the political upheaval. But that was only a transient phase. No doubt Tukaram and others, who were conscious of the occasional usefulness of militant and organised activities had blessed the efforts of Ramdas; and the new movement, assimilating as it did the noblest tendencies of renunciation and patriotism, was for a time irresistible. But the nation as a whole refused to accept it permanently. It stood by that elastic organi-

sation which Dnyaneshwar and Namdev had strengthened but not started, which Ekanath watered but not planted and which Tukaram served only to popularize. Only the worship of Vithoba has lived. Even now in the crescent plain of Pandharpur, at least six hundred thousand people from all parts of Maharashtra gather twice a year to pay their Homage to King Vithoba. At the call of Pandhari they heed not, care not what sacrifice they make and with the orange flag on their shoulders often walk barefooted to the city of Vithoba. On entering it, they will not eat a morsel of food, will refuse even a drop of water but will sit for even three days, in the dust of the streets till the thinned crowds enable them to get admittance into the portals of the temple. Such faith is found at Pandhari alone. Well might the poet, in his innocence believe that Vithoba occupies His throne for twenty-eight centuries (ages). We, with less faith and more historical knowledge, know that the temple at Pandharpur was built about a couple of centuries before

the times of Dnyaneshwar. But even the confirmed sceptic would like to brush aside all prosaic thoughts of historicity and allow his feelings to be swept away by the sweet, musical, air-rending but heart-filling cry of Vithal issuing from the lips of ecstatic people. Again and again will it alternate with the sacred names of Dnyanadev, (Dnyaneshwar) Ekanath, Namdev and Tukaram. The passionate earnestness of Tukaram, the Divine madness of Namdev, the sublime spirit of Dnyaneshwar, the catholic heart of Ekanath,—each has contributed its own quota to the prestige of Pandhari, and though there are other aspects of the life of Ekanath which are equally important, still in the mind of the orthodox many, the image of Ekanath will, forever, remain indissolubly associated with the worship of that God who “for the last twenty-eight ages” has been shielding Maharashtra from all sorts of national disasters.

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